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ABSTRACT

Though Freud often is portrayed by advocates of women's liberation as the villain in the 'biology is destiny' controversy, Freud was very much a person of his own times. Rather than inventing the 'biology is destiny' theme, he was perpetuating a tradition that dates from at least the time of the Greeks, and which was deeply engrained in 19th century medicine. If this is the case the villain is not so much Freud, but the medical and psychological assumptions of the past. (Author)

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IS BIOLOGY DESTINY? A Defense? of Freud

Vern L. Bullough

Critics of women's lib have generally argued that biology is destiny, that the very nature of the female reproductive system prevents women from achieving equality. Usually cited as the villain in perpetrating such views is Sigmund Freud. Kate Millet, a hostile and sometimes naive critic, is perhaps typical. She summed up her indictment by claiming that the

> effect of Freud's work, that of his followers, and still more of his popularizers, was to rationalize the invidious relationships between the sexes, to ratify traditional roles, and to validate temperamental differences. 1

Though this might be somewhat of an exaggerated statement, a significant number of opponents of women's lib have put their arguments in Freudian terms.

Marie Bonaparte, for example, wrote that constitutionally females were less aggressive than males, and it was the constitutionally stronger aggressive instincts of the males that were important in determining male superiority.[2] Helen Deutsch, in her work on female sexuality, argued for the importance of the sexual act for women but at the same time emphasized that this should be experienced in a feminine way, not transformed into an act of erotic play or an attempt at sexual equality.[3] Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia F. Farnham, two of the most effective popularizers of the traditional feminine role in the immediate post World War II period, were also strongly influenced by Freud. They defined political feminism as an evil which, by encouraging women in their drive for economic independence and denying the need for male protection, were eliminating the traditional beneficial economic forces that served as a bulwark to marriage and family.[4] Marie Robinson argued that woman's difficulty and her essential maladjustment lay in the fact that she had been misled by feminism from her unchangeable con titutional passivity. Even frigidty was regarded as due to an

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unwillingness to enjoy and accept male dominance.[5] There have, of course, been psychoanalytic critics of this aspect of Freudian thought from such diverse individuals as C. J. Jung,[6] Karen Horney,[7] and Viola Klein.[8]

The purpose of this paper is not to examine the errors of either Freud or his critics, something of which I am not capable, but rather to argue that from the feminist point of view the enemy is not and was not Freud but the historical and cultural tradition of which he was a part. The problem with Freud then becomes not the fact that he was a man, but that he was a man caught up in the male western tradition which has argued that women ought to be, should be, and must be subordinate.[9] What Freud did was to accept the truth of the tradition and find support for his belief by updating traditional arguments for female inferiority.

Though it is probably impossible to document that women were any more dissatisfied or unhappy with their role during Freud's lifetime than any time before in history, it is easy to point out that the traditional role and status of women were being more effectively challenged than ever before. Industrialization and urbanization and other events of which women (or men) had little control had given middle and upper class women more free time than before but it had also undermined their traditional role without opening up many alternatives. To some extent the free time allowed women to devote more time to developing the psyche of their children and husband, and the literature continually emphasizes the importance of the mother role, but not every woman wanted to live her entire life through the lives of her husband or her children. Traditionally as a passive and subordinate person women had been allowed to be hysterical when their adjustment to society proved

difficult since society expected and accepted this as within the accepted norms of female conduct. Thus it is not too surprising that it was hysteria which led Freud to psychoanalysis. The case of Anna O, discussed, analyzed, and dissected by Freud not only led Freud to psychoanalysis but also encouraged him, in my opinion, to accept the standard stereotypes about the proper role and function of women.[10] In the standard version of the story it is emphasized how Freud and Breuer were struck with the fact that hysteria was not necessarily the result of any kind of emotional excitement but rather the underlying causes were sexual in nature, either current sexual conflict or the hangover effect of earlier sexual experience. Freud claimed that it was only much later that he became aware that in attributing hysteria to sexuality he was following up an idea first espoused by Plato.[11] I do not want to challenge Freud's veracity but only to emphasize that this was the standard view of hysteria throughout much of history and Freud was simply putting the matter in slightly different terms.

Plato in his Timaeus had stated that the womb was an

> Indwelling creature desirous of child bearing. [When] it remains barren too long after puberty, it is distressed and sorely disturbed, and straying about in the body and cutting off the passages of the breath, it impedes respiration and brings the sufferer into extreme anguish and provokes all manners of disease besides. 12

Though most ancient and medieval writers did not agree with Plato that the womb was an animal which moved about in the body, almost all agreed that it could cause difficulty.[13] They also agreed, as did Freud and Breuer, that the real cure for a troublesome womb was intercourse and pregnancy. Breuer remarked that "I do not think I am exaggerating when I assert that the great majority of severe neuroses in women have their origin in the marriage bed."[14] Galen had said much the same thing. Galen believed that women had a semen-like substance, the retention of which caused problems. Since this semen could

only be eliminated by having an orgasm or being pregnant, and this posed problems for the single and widowed women as well as others in special conditions, he advocated that the problem be solved by applying warm substances to the pudenda and using digital manipulation (i.e. masturbation).

> Following the warmth of the remedies and arising from the touch of the genital organs required by the treatment there followed twitchings accompanied at the same time by pain and pleasure after which she emitted turbi and abundant sperm. Thus it seems to me that the retention of sperm impregnated with evil essences had -- in causing damage throughout the body -- a much greater power than that of the retention of the menses. 15

In the medieval period the same notion was held by the legendary Dame Trotula who reported that the wombs were likely to cause trouble when

> "too much spoiled seed abounds in them and it changes to a poisonous character. Especially does this happen to those who have no husbands, widows in particular and those who previously have been accustomed to make use of carnal intercourse. It also happens in virgins who have come to marriageable years and have not yet husbands for in them abounds the seed which nature wished to draw out by means of the male. From this superabundant and spoiled seed a certain cold substance is formed which ascends to certain parts which by common use are called vocal organs, whence an impediment to the voice is wont to happen. Illness of this sort is accustomed principally to being with a failure of the menses and they cease and there is too much seed the illness is much more troublesome and prolonged especially when it takes possession of the higher parts." 16

In a sense this explanation is as valid as Freud's belief that sexuality had a "somatic side" to it which involved special chemical processes, and that hysteria was a result of such "disturbed sexual chemical processes."[17] As Ilza Veith pointed out several years ago, Freud more or less verified the insights of the ancients.[18] In the process of course he accepted the belief that it was essential that a woman recognize her inferiority to the male, and gave renewed backing to what men had always claimed was the cure for a troublesome woman, namely to take them to bed. His solution, as Viola Kline has argued, simply ignored the cultural conditions that had made women

frustrated and unhappy.[19]

Freud has a simple answer for this. The real problem with women was not that they were unhappy with their passive role and envious of man's greater freedom, but rather they were simply envious of a male's penis.[20] In fact Freud argued that the girl's discovery of her lack of penis was such a catastrophe that it continued to haunt her throughout her life.

> As we learn from psycho-analytic work, women regard themselves as wronged from infancy, as undeservedly cut short and set back; and the embitterment of so many daughters against their mothers derives in the last analysis, from the reproach against her of having brought them into the world as women instead of as men. [21]

As soon as little girls make the momentous discovery that boys have penises while they do not, they at "once recognize it as the superior counterpart of their own small and inconspicuous organ, and from that time forward fall a victim to envy for the penis.[22] This is a somewhat more harsh statement about females than traditionally existed in western culture. The Roman medical writer, Soranus, listed several ancient authorities who held that women were essentially different from men but concluded that he, along with the majority of authorities, held that women were not formed from any different materials from men.[23] Still there was a widespread belief that women were designed to be weaker and inferior to men. St. Albertus Magnus, for example, held that the sex of the child was determined during conception and if the seed material was well digested and strong it led to creation of males but if it was poorly digested and weak it resulted in a femalization and the birth of a girl. [24] Though the ancient and medieval writers never hit upon the idea of penis envy they did offer as concrete proof that the female's lack of a male organ was the cause of her physical inferiority, since if the testicles of a male were cut off, as happened in the case of eunuchs, the male "complexion" changed to a female one. [25]

Another difficulty with women was that they menstruated. This was tied in with the natural sedentary style of women since menstruation was a kind of a cleansing operation for women while in men the same effect could only be achieved by exercise and activity.[26] God, in the eyes of St. Thomas Aquinas, had delegated the power of gestation to females in order to leave man freer to pursue intellectual tasks.[27] This same idea was carried over into nineteenth century medicine by Edward H. Clarke and though the implication is hinted at by Freud, it is carried to its fruition by the American G. Stanley Hall who introduced Freud to America.

In the last part of the nineteenth century, following the beliefs of E. F. W. Pfluger there was a widespread belief that menstruation was triggered by a mechanical stimulus of the nerves resulting from the growing follicle in the uterus.[28] This thesis was seized upon by Edward H. Clarke, a professor of materia medica at Harvard to argue as St. Thomas Aquinas had done, that intellectual tasks be reserved to men, a view which Freud seems to accept but never really spelled out. In 1873 Clark wrote that though women undoubtedly had the right to do anything of which they were physically capable, one of the things they could not do and still retain their good health was to be educated on the pattern and model of men. This was because while the male developed steadily and gradually from birth to manhood, the female at puberty had a sudden and unique period of growth coinciding with the development of her reproductive system.[29] Since Clarke, as well as most physicians of the time, believed that the body could not do "two things well at the same time," it was essential in his mind that the female between 12 and 20 devote all her energies to developing her reproductive system. If she tried to combine this development with intensive schooling there would be an overload of her switchboard, and signals from the developing organs of reproduction would be ignored in favor of those coming from the overactive brain. Any mental activity

during the "catamenial week" would interfere with ovulation and menstruation,[30] the necessary physiological processes associated with being female. He then proceeded to demonstrate from his own clinical cases that higher education left a great number of female adherents in poor health for life. Women who concentrated upon education rather than the development of their reproductive system tended to lose "the maternal instincts" of a woman and become coarse and forceful like a man. By educating women we were thus creating a class of sexless humans analgous to eunuchs.[31]

Though there was considerable unfavorable reaction to Clarke's thesis, many accepted it including G. Stanley Hall albeit in a slightly modified form. Hall accepted Clarke's arguments on the dangers of higher education for women and as proof he offered the "fact" that American girls had their first menses at an average age of 14 while European girls who were less educated waited until they were 15.5 years old. This precocity of American girls, he claimed was "due chiefly to mentality and nerve stimulation," in other words, education. "Education," theorized Hall, "in a temperate or subarctic zone is more productive of precocity than in the south, and if the general nervous stimulus is the case, the same schooling is more dangerous in the city than in the country."[32] Hall, perhaps because of the growing power of feminism, was unwilling to abolish education for the female altogether, but he suggested that girls observe a sort of monthly sabbath for four consecutive days rather than observing the weekly one. These days were to be devoted to leisure and religion, since during menstruation the female was inclined to a "natural piety and sense of dependence," which accounted for the fact that women were more religious than men.[33] He believed that the female life was ruled by periodicity and for most of her life a woman had no alternative but to give way to its dictates. This required that special schools be established for

girls since putting girls into intimacy of the classroom with boys destroyed their bloom and delicacy and in such schools the monthly Sabbath should be observed in which idleness was to be actively cultivated,

> in which the soul, which needs these seasons of withdrawal for its own development, expatiates over the whole life of the race, should be provided for an encouraged in every legitimate way, for in rest the whole momentum of heredity is felt in ways most favorable to full and complete development. Then women should realize that <u>to be</u> is greater than <u>to do</u>; should step reverently aside from her daily routine and let Lord Nature work. 34

By being "bookish" women lapsed into male manners and fashions, declined from her orbit," and obscured her "original divinity."[35] This concept had a strong hold on those in the Freudian tradition, and more recently, for example, Erik Erikson, spoke of a woman being "unfulfilled" every moment she was not pregnant in almost the same tones that Hall did. For, as he said,

> "clinical observation suggests that in female experience an "inner space" is at the center of despair even as it is the very center of potential fulfillment. Emptiness is the female form of perdition--known at times to men of the inner life . . . but standard experience for all women. To be left, for her, means to be left empty . . . Such hurt can be re-experienced in each menstruation; it is a crying to heaven in the mourning over a child; and it becomes a permanent scar in the menopause. 36

Freud did not quite put the matter in such terms but he did regard the undeveloped feminine intellect as due to her sexuality which inhibited all other mental effort.[37] Since a woman's thirst for knowledge might lead to society regarding this desire as a sign of immoral tendencies, women according to Freud, could only inhibit, repress, resulting in the depreciation of mental effort and knowledge.[38] He argues almost circuitously that since women have contributed little to civilization, they must be incapable of contributing at all. Civilization has been made possible through sublimation and "women, as the true guardians of the race," are endowed with the power of sublimation only to a limited degree."[39]

At times Freud seemed to believe in a kind of organistic theory of history in which there has been only a limited amount of vital energy in every culture and that losses suffered through sex could not be replaced. He wrote

> We believe that civilization has been built up, under the pressure of the struggle for existence, by sacrifices in gratification of the primitive impulses, and that it is to a great extent forever being re-created, as each individual, successively joining the community, repeats the sacrifice of his instinctive pleasures for the common good. The sexual are amongst the most important of the instinctive forces thus utilized: they are in this way sublimated, that is to say, their energy is turned aside from its sexual goal and diverted towards other ends, no longer sexual and socially more valuable. 40

The extreme of this thesis was advocated by the Freudian J. E. Unwin who held that since the cultural conditions of any society were dependent upon the amount of its mental and social energy, and this in turn was dependent upon the extent of compulsory continence, creative societies could only exist when sexual outlets were highly restricted. He postulated that no society could display productive social energy unless each new generation inherited a social system under which sexual opportunity was reduced to a minimum. Historically he felt that the only way such a thing had been possible was through "absolute monogamy," where the husband had absolute power over his wife and children. Unfortunately, he added, no society had ever tolerated this male domination for long periods because it made women and children legal nonenities, and as women made demands for changes the results were a reduction of marriages to a union made and broken by mutual consent, a demand for laxation of pre-nuptial continence, and a decline in intellectuality. Inevitably the achieving societies decreased and faded away.[41]

What we have here is a continuation of ideas expressed much earlier by St. Thomas Aquinas who had argued that

> good order would have been wanting in the human family if some were not governed by others wiser than themselves. So by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in men the discretion of reason predominates. 42

Galen summed up many of these ideas of Freud and his disciples nearly two thousand years ago when he gave the scientific reasons for women's inferiority:

> "The female is less perfect than the male for one, principal reason--because she is colder . . . Now just as mankind is the most perfect of all animals, so within mankind the man is more pefect than the woman, and the reason for this perfection is his excess of heat, for heat is Nature's primary instrument. Hence in those animals that have less of it, her workmanship is necessarily more imperfect, and so it is no wonder that the female is less perfect than the male by as much as she is colder than he. In fact, just as the mole has imperfect eyes, though certainly not so imperfect as they are in those animals that do not have any trace of them at all, so too the woman is less perfect than the man in respect to the generative parts. For the parts were formed within her when she was still a fetus, but could not because of the defect in the heat emerge and project on the outside, and this, though making the animals itself that was being formed less perfect than one that is complete in all respects, provided no small advantage for the race; for there needs must be a female. Indeed, you ought not to think that our Creator would purposely make half the whole race imperfect and, as it were, mutulated, unless there was to be some great advantage in such a mutilation." 43

In short the problem with Freud is not that he gave a new basis for women's subordination to men, but that he repeated and adopted the traditional explanations put forth over thousands of years. He was a victim of his own time and background. He did not really understand women and though he accepted them as humans he could never regard them as equal to men. He once confessed to Marie Bonaparte that after thirty years of research into the feminine psyche he had never been able to answer the question that troubled him, namely "what does a woman want?" 44 Probably any feminist could have told him. They wanted to be regarded as equal to men even though their anatomy might be different and their biological functions different. Their anatomy was in no

ways inferior to a man but Freud in emphasizing that it was had been repeating what man apparently has always believed. Perhaps it is time that we began to investigate the real meaning of these differences, particularly since the development of the pill, the sanitary pad, the nursing bottle, and so forth have eliminated most of the physical disabilities previously associated with being female.

NOTES

1 Kate Millet, Sexual Politics (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1970), p. 178.

2 Marie Bonaparte, Female Sexuality (reprinted New York: Grove Press), p. 81.

3 Helen Deutsch, Female Sexuality: The Psychology of Women (2 vols., New York: Grune and Stratton, 1945), II, 103.

4 Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia F. Farnham, Modern Woman, The Lost Sex (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), pp. 191-92, and passim.

5 Marie N. Robinson, The Power of Sexual Surrender (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1959).

6 For a discussion of this see Ann Bedford Ulanov, The Feminine in Jungian Psychology and on Christian Theology (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971), and also Erich Neumann, The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archtype, translated by Ralph Manheim, Bollingen Series 47 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1955).

7 See, for example, Karen Horney, "The Dream of Woman," International Journal of Psychoanalysis, XIII (1932), 348-360.

8 Viola Klein, The Feminine Character, History of an Ideology (London: Kegan Paul, 1946).

9 I have developed the western concept of subordination at some length in my The Subordinate Sex: A History of Attitudes Toward Women (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1973).

10 See Josef Breuer & Sigmund Freud, Studies on Hysteria, translated by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud (New York: Basic Books, 1957).

NOTES 2

11 Sigmund Freud, An Autobiographical Study (London: The Hogarth Press, 1935), p. 42.

12 Plato, Timaeus, 91C, edited and translated by R. G. Bury (London: William Heinemann, 1961).

13 I have examined these ideas rather extensively in "Medieval Medical and Scientific Attitudes Towards Women," VIATOR (in press).

14 Breuer & Freud, op. cit., p. 246.

15 See Henri Cresbron, Histoire critique de l'hysterie (Paris: Asselin et Houzean, 1909), p. 44.

16 Trotula, The Diseases of Women, translated Elizabeth Mason-Hohl (Los Angeles: Ward Ritchie Press, 1940), chap. iv, p. 11.

17 Freud, Autobiography, pp. 44-46.

18 Ilza Veith, Hysteria: The History of a Disease (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 265-66.

19 Klein, op. cit., pp. 72-73.

20 Sigmund Freud, "The Taboo of Virginity," in Collected Papers, translated by Joan Riviere (5 vols., reprinted: Basic Books, 1959), IV, 226, and "Some Psychiatric Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," V, 186-97.

21 Freud, "Some Character Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic Work," IV, 323.

22 Freud, "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," V, 190.

23 Soranus, Gynecology, III, I, ii, v, translated Owsei Temking (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), p. 129.

24 Claudius Franz Mayer, "Die Personallehre in der Naturphilosophie von Albertus Magnus," Kyklos, II (1929), 191-257.

25 Bartholomaei Anglici, De Rerum Proprietatibus Libri XVIII, edited Georgio Bartholdo (Frankfurt: Minerva, 1964), V, xlviii.

26 Paul Diepgen, Frau und Frauenheilkunde in der Kultur des Mittelalters (Stuttgart: George Thieme Verlag, 1963), pp. 156-57.

27 St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), IA, 92, i.

28 E. F. W. Pfluger, Ueber die Eierstocke der Saugethiere und des Menschen (Leipzig: Englemann, 1863).

29 Edward H. Clarke, Sex in Education; or a Fair Chance for Girls (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1874), pp. 37-38.

30 Ibid., pp. 40-41.

31 Ibid., p. 133.

32 G. Stanley Hall, Adolescence, Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religions and Education (2 vols., New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904), I, 478.

33 Ibid., I, 511.

34 Ibid., II, 639.

35 Ibid., II, 646.

36 Erik Erikson, "Womanhood and the Inner Space," Identity, Youth and Crisis (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), p. 290.

37 Freud, "Civilized Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness," Collected Papers, II, 94

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., p. 78.

40 Sigmund Freud, A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis, translated by Joan Riviere (Nrw York: Garden City Publishing Company, 1943), pp. 23-24. See also Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents (London: Hogarth Press, 1930).

41 J. D. Unwin, Sexual Regulations and Human Behavior (London: Williams and Norgate, 1933), pp. ix-x, 85-87, 108. See also Unwin, Sex and Culture (London: Oxford University Press, 1934).

42 St. Thomas Aquinas, op. cit., I, Part I, 92, "The Production of Women," I, ii.

43 Galen, On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body (De usu partium), Book XIV, 6, translated Margaret Tallmade May (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 628-30.

44 Freud in a letter to Marie Bonaparte quoted in Ernest Jones, The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud (New York: Basic Books, 1953), II, 421.